

CONTEMPORARY POPULISM AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN WESTERN EUROPE¹

Maria Daniela Poli

ABSTRACT

Given a threatening new wave of populism crossing Europe, this article examines the link between populism and crisis as a Gordian knot and explores the relationship between contemporary populism and the Great Recession in Western Europe by underscoring how the principal feature of this relationship is the perception of the European Union as a common enemy.

Key words: *Populism, crisis, Great Recession, political crisis, European Union*

INTRODUCTION

The current economic crisis in Europe has changed the traditional panorama of political parties in the European Union's member states. New formations have been forged and these new entities' declarations of their direct relationships with the people, are often based on "a thin-centred ideology," a contraposition between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Or, to put it more mildly, these groups are based on "an ideology claiming that the political class has lost contact with the real will of people and promising to give it voice," (Pinelli, 2011, p. 5). At the same time, older radical parties are being reinforced. Thus, it seems that a new spectre is haunting Europe: the spectre of populism. The concerns this phenomenon raises—the dominant liberal approach consistently attaches a negative connotation to populism and regards it as a democratic pathology²—are quite evident. In 2010, in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, EU President Herman von Rompuy declared populism "the greatest danger for Europe" (Stabenow 2010). Rompuy's statement remains relevant today. More recently, in a September 13, 2015 interview with *Corriere della Sera*, President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini declared that "political integration is the only antidote to the populism" (Caprara 2015).

Hence, with some important exceptions like Italy,³ populism has historically been a marginal political phenomenon in Western Europe since the Second World War (especially

MARIA DANIELA POLI – Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Konstanz, maria.daniela.poli@uni-konstanz.de.

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² As Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) explains, in evaluating the relationship between populism and democracy, the liberal approach considers populism a democratic pathology, the radical approach considers populism an essential element of democracy, and the minimal approach regards populism in relation to democracy with ambivalence.

³ Populists have been a permanent feature of Italian politics from Mussolini to Renzi, with many in between: Lauro, Craxi, Berlusconi, Bossi, Di Pietro, Salvini and Grillo. For more, see: Tranfaglia 2014. For populism in the current government of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, see: Revelli 2015.

in comparison with Latin America). Yet, recent elections clearly reveal the rapid development of populism in Western Europe, where gains have been made by the National Front (FN) in France,⁴ the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany,⁵ the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy,⁶ the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) in Great Britain,⁷ the Finns Party in Finland⁸ and, above all, the January 2015 triumph and more muted September 2015 victory of Greece's Syriza (the Coalition of the Radical Left)⁹. The rise of populism is similarly evident in the success of Podemos in Spain¹⁰ and Juntos-Podemos in Portugal.¹¹ The Brexit-referendum is also a clear sign of populism. The most cited significant cause of this wave of populism is the economic crisis spurred in 2009—a crisis that, by threatening the heart of constitutional state and the foundations of the European integration process, has also become an intense political crisis.

However, as Benjamin Moffitt (2015, p. 189 and p. 191) wrote, although “a focus on crisis is a mainstay of the literature on contemporary populism . . . the links between populism and crisis remain under-theorized and undeveloped . . . [and no journal article] directly addresses the relationship between populism and crisis as its central focus.” Given this, what is the relation between populism and economic crisis today in Western Europe?

⁴ In the 2012 presidential elections, the National Front achieved surprisingly good results with 17.9 per cent of the votes and two seats in the legislative elections held the same year. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, the National Front gained 24.86 per cent of the votes and shook the country by gaining 24 of France's 74 seats. In the first round of the departmental and regional elections, held in March and December 2015, respectively, the National Front's winnings exceeded 25 percent and 28 percent of the votes, respectively before failing in the second round due to a strategic alliance against the National Front forged between Republicans and Socialists. In fact, Socialists withdrew their candidates and endorsed the mainstream rivals, the Republican party candidates.

⁵ Although Alternative for Germany did not overcome the 5 per cent electoral threshold in the 2013 federal elections, it did win 4.7 per cent of the votes. It was certainly “a remarkable debut in the comparatively very stable party system in Germany,” (Siemens 2013).

⁶ In the 2013 general elections, the Five Star Movement won 25.6 per cent of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 23.8 per cent for the Senate and, consequently, 109 deputies and 54 senators, earning the party the consent of the disillusioned left, the People of Freedom and Northern League voters.

⁷ In the 2015 general elections, UKIP won more than 1.3 million votes, becoming the third largest party in the United Kingdom. However, it gained only one seat in the House of Commons.

⁸ The Finns Party became the third largest party in the Finnish Parliament after the 2011 national elections and gained more ground in the 2015 elections when it became the second largest party and joined the current government coalition formed solely of the Centre-Party, the Finns Party, and the National Coalition Party.

⁹ Syriza gained 36 per cent of the votes and 145 seats in January 2015; 35.5 per cent of the votes and 145 seats in September 2015.

¹⁰ In the national elections in December 2015, Podemos became the third largest party in the Spanish Parliament with 20.7 per cent of the votes and 69 seats. Although the results of the national election held on June 26, 2016 disappointed Podemos, they confirmed the political weight gained by this party: 21.1 per cent of the votes and 71 seats. Furthermore, the Brexit-effect played an important role on this election, voters preferred the “safe” traditional parties—the People's Party (PP) and the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)—over the “adventurous” Podemos actors. The need for a stable executive remains, since the People's Party did not obtain an absolute majority and building a government is proving to be very difficult.

¹¹ Although the group has not developed into a party, in the October 2015 elections, Juntos-Podemos endorsed the Left Bloc (*Bloco de Esquerda*), which became the third strongest force in Spain's parliament with ten per cent of the votes, its biggest win in its sixteen years.

1. POPULISM AND CRISIS: A GORDIAN KNOT?

The correlation between populism and crisis seems to be intuitive: populism rises from crisis and populism stokes crisis. Yet, despite this common perception, this populism-crisis link is not, from a scientific point of view, so simple. Because both the concept of crisis and the concept of populism are nebulous and somewhat indeterminate, some scholars doubt or criticize any connection between them. In his book on Europe's populist radical right parties, Cas Mudde—despite recognizing the validity of some empirical studies—clearly reveals his scepticism of a crisis-populism connection because of the difficulty of defining *crisis*.¹² Furthermore, in his analysis on populism and neo-populism in Latin America, Alan Knight even denies that there is a nexus between populism and crisis, “Even more than ‘populism’, however, ‘crisis’, is a vague, promiscuously used, under-theorized concept which defies measurement and lacks explanatory power. To attribute ‘populism’ to ‘crisis’ may often be historically valid, but it does not afford a robust aetiology; and trying to explain one vague concept in terms of another is hardly a promising line of inquiry. Furthermore, this association is at best a rough tendency or correlation, *not* a definitional requirement or essential criterion. Populism, in short, can exist in ‘normal’, ‘non critical’ times,” (1998, pp. 227-228).

Another general counterargument holds that in the modern era there is *always* a political crisis in progress: the end of ideology crisis of the 1950s and 1960s, the participation crisis of the 1970s, the party crisis of the 1980s (Mudde 2007, p. 207) and 1990s, the globalization crisis of the second millennium, and those due to the ongoing economic crisis.

Although these objections are appealing, they do not stand up to the evidence. The dimension and the complexity of the two concepts, as well as their multiple faces, do not make their link weaker. And, if the problem of defining a nexus is the lack of a clear definition or either populism or crisis, we could not talk in general about populism. In fact, Isaiah Berlin's so-called Cinderella complex,¹³ in which a prince seeks the owner of a shoe called populism, is yet to be overcome. Furthermore, historical data showing that populism takes its strength

¹² “Emphasis on the vital role of ‘crisis’ is a constant in studies of both historical and contemporary nativism and populism ... So far, the term ‘crisis’ has proven of limited use analytically because, although intuitively it may be easy to comprehend, it proves quite difficult to specify. Most authors do not even bother to try to articulate what constitutes a crisis, they simply state that a certain process has led to one, assuming that both the meaning of the term and the existence of the crisis are self-evident. Others define the term so broadly that virtually every period can be interpreted through the lens of the crisis. Finally, a number of authors seem to determine the existence of a crisis largely on the basis of the success of populist actors, which makes the relationship tautological. The definitional and operationalizational deficiencies in the crisis literature should not lead an a priori rejection of the whole research in this field. In fact, in many instances the empirical research itself is quite sound, focusing on statistically significant correlations between various economic and political independent variables and the dependent variable of populist radical parties electoral success. The key problem in this literature is the relationship between these variables and the overarching concept of crisis,” (Mudde 2007, p. 205).

¹³ “There exist a shoe—the word ‘populism’—for which somewhere exists a foot. There are all kinds of feet, which it nearly fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly fitting feet. The prince is always wandering about with the shoe; and somewhere, we feel sure, there awaits a limb called pure populism,” was pronounced in 1967, during the *Government and Opposition* conference organized by the review, at the London School of Economic and Political Science (LSE) and was later quoted by Canovan (1981, p. 7). For more on the difficulties of defining populism, starting from the Cinderella complex, see: Tarchi 2004 and 2013.

from crisis in all its various forms cannot be taken lightly or ignored. As Ernesto Laclau (2005, p. 177) recalls, “Without the slump of the 1930s, Hitler would have remained a vociferous fringe ringleader. Without the crisis of the Fourth Republic around the Algerian war, De Gaulle’s appeal would have remained as unheard as it had been in 1946. And without the progressive erosion of the oligarchical system in the Argentina of the 1930s, the rise of Perón would have been unthinkable.”

Hence, the imputation of populism to the crisis cannot merely be regarded as a tautological tendency, though some do (Knight 1998, p. 227 nt. 22). Rather, “some degree of crisis in the old structure is a necessary precondition of populism” (Laclau 2005, p. 177). As Paul Taggart (2004, p. 275; 2002, p. 69) has written, “. . . populism is a reaction to a sense of extreme crisis. Populism is not the politics of the stable, ordered polity but comes as an accompaniment to change, crisis and challenge.” Very different experiences in diverse parts of the world clearly illustrate Taggart’s observation: the development of populist movements in America at the time of the Revolutionary War, the success of populism in Latin America against the backdrop of a highly unequal society, the diffusion of populism in Eastern Europe after the 1989 transition to pluralism, and the rise of Berlusconi in Italy (a paradigmatic example of media populism) due to the end of the political ideologies that had characterized Italian history—the so-called crisis of the First Republic.

Moreover, the fact that crises are permanent fixtures of contemporary politics does not demonstrate the contrary; it means only that a certain dose of populism is an inevitable element of modern democracies. The same can be said with regard to the existence of other external factors—such as corruption, inequality, and disenchantment—and the difficulty of distinguishing the impact of these factors on the rise of populism. In addition, these factors are often so inextricable from a crisis that they cannot be evaluated or examined in isolation.

Therefore, the first link between crisis and populism is causal. However, as Moffitt (2015, pp. 194-195) suggests, the relationship between crises and populism is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship. What is important is not only the crisis itself, but perceptions of crisis, perceptions influenced by policy. Moffitt draws particular attention to this in his assertion that, “populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis, rather than simply reacting to external crisis,” (2015, p. 195). As Taggart (2004, p. 275) writes, populists use the sense of a crisis “to inject an urgency and an importance to their message.” They provide a particular interpretation of the causes of a crisis in order to distinguish the common people, whom they aspire to represent, from the elite whom they hold accountable for the status quo. The populist proposal is based on a mediation and internalization of the system’s exaggerated weak points; hence, crises are fertile ground for populist discourses. This game plan relies heavily on manipulating citizens’ feelings about the situation they live in to present a distorted reality. Racial discrimination provides an elementary example of this phenomena. In fact, racial discrimination is a permanent element of right-wing populism, which consistently scapegoats racial minorities. Today, populists campaign on strong anti-immigration platforms, scapegoating the influx of immigrants in much of Europe and relying on and perpetuating the perception that these newcomers are responsible for growing unemployment and increases in crime.

So, in addition to its role as an external input, crisis is also an internal feature of populism (Moffitt 2015). It follows that the relationship between populism and crisis is so intrinsically tangled that their nexus can only be regarded as a Gordian knot. In fact, the relationship is dual, because populism emerges from crisis and takes advantage of crisis in order to gain success. At the same time, the relationship between populism and crisis is circular in nature—and occurs in a cycle of crisis-populism-crisis—because populism both feeds and fuels crisis, so much so that it is sometimes impossible to identify the boundaries between one and the other.

2. CONTEMPORARY POPULISM AND THE GREAT RECESSION IN WESTERN EUROPE

Today, driven by the ongoing Great Recession, the new wave of populism that emerged in 2009 continues to cross Europe. According to the most recent and thorough study of this topic, Takis S. Pappas and Hanspeter Kriesi's empirical comparative analysis, *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*,¹⁴ "during the Great Recession populism in Europe increased notably by 4.1 per cent," (2015, p. 323). Is this 4.1 per cent increase a temporal coincidence or does it indicate a real connection between the rise of populism and the economic crisis?

Although isolating the economic factor is almost impossible, the direct relationship between populism and economic crisis is clearly illustrated in comparative analyses. The so-called PIIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain, and Great Britain—Great Britain is sometimes included in the acronym with the addition of a second *G* to form *PIIGGS*) are the states most heavily affected by the economic crisis; they have seen a rise in the popularity of their populist parties. In contrast, this trend towards populism is quite moderate or even declining in northern and central western Europe that was not greatly affected by the economic crisis—with the exceptions of France and Finland. The success of France's Marine Le Pen confirms the relationship between populism and the economic crisis, France suffered so seriously from the economic crisis that Patrick Allen suggested adding France to the PIIGS list (2012). Likewise, in Finland—a country that the economic crisis seems to have made into the "new sick man of Europe" (Rosendahl and Ercanbrack 2015; Khan 2015)—the populist Finns Party has fared well recently. In contrast, however, Poland is "a green island of stability in the EU economic crisis," (Faggiani 2015). The Polish case, as Ben Stanley observes, "lends support to the expectation that economic crisis would stimulate populism . . . Poland did not experience an economic crisis, and at the same time did not experience an increase of populism," (2015, p. 268).

The populism-crisis link is also sustained by the fact that the number and variety of contemporary populist parties has grown during the years of crisis. The National Front in France, the UKIP in Great Britain, the Northern League (LN) in Italy, and the Finns Party in Finland have

¹⁴ The study—based on three variables: 1) GDP growth, 2) unemployment rates, and 3) national gross debt—examines twenty-five populist parties in seventeen countries. Pappas and Kriesi divide the European political arena into five regions and identify each with degrees of crisis and populism: 1) the Nordic group (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland)—incidental crisis, moderate populism; 2) the Western group (France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland)—modest crisis, declining populism; 3) the Southern group (Italy and Greece)—strong populism fueled by grave crisis; 4) the CEE group (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary)—varying crises, disparate populism; and 5) the Anglo-Saxon countries (United Kingdom, Ireland)—similar crisis, contrasting outcomes. For more, see: Pappas and Kriesi 2015, pp. 303-325.

even gained consensus thanks to the crisis. Not only do parties like these continue to exist, but new formations were born such as:

- ♦ The Five Star Movement in Italy, a party launched by comedian Beppe Grillo in 2009;¹⁵
- ♦ The Alternative for Germany in Germany, founded in 2012 by publicists Konrad Adam and Alexander Gauland and economist Bernd Lucke;¹⁶
- ♦ Syriza in Greece—in 2013 the party united what had been a coalition of the left wing and the radical left parties since 2004;¹⁷
- ♦ Podemos in Spain, developed from the aftermath of the *Indignados* movement and instituted in 2014 by Complutense University of Madrid Political Science lecturer Pablo Iglesias.¹⁸
- ♦ Juntos Podemos in Portugal, a political movement led by psychologist Joana Amaral Freitas that has still not developed into a party, but supported the Left Bloc (*Bloco de Esquerda*) during the October 2015 election.

The exception of Ireland—where a new populist party did *not* emerge despite the severity of crisis there—does not really constitute a contradiction in terms as populism is diffuse across all of Ireland’s opposition parties. O’ Malley and FitzGibbon note that “while Ireland after the crisis lacks a classic populist party, the political system is in fact resplendent with populist actors and rhetoric,” (2015, p. 288).

Obviously, another relevant aspect of the link between populism and economic crisis is the recurring use of the economic crisis in political discourse: all of the newly formed populist political groups exploit public perceptions of the economic crisis and frequently blame the European Union for their country’s economic woes.

Contemporary populism in Western Europe, however, is not just a product of the ongoing economic, financial, and sovereign debt crisis (Pappas 2015). True, populism has grown in the shadow of the Great Recession, but it rides not only the recent wave of economic problems, but also travels on the backs of other crises such as the crisis of representation and the failures of the European welfare state, which the economic problems of the Great Recession brought to light. Populism’s intensity would be otherwise inexplicable, as would be the rise of populism in northern Europe and even Germany—countries that have suffered less of an impact during the economic crisis.

If, as Ernesto Laclau (2005, p. 137) remarks, the root of populism is a crisis of representation, this current root of populism has gained strength and depth due to dysfunctional representative mechanisms at two levels: the national level and the European level. In fact, on one hand, distrust of political parties (which the Germans refer to with their own efficacious word, *Parteiverdrossenheit*) and the decline of party democracies have become ever stronger. On the other hand, though the national parliaments ceded their decision-making power when they

¹⁵ For more about the Five Star Movement, see: Corbetta and Gualmini 2013; Bartlett, Froio, Littler and McDonnell 2013; Diamanti 2014; Natale 2014; Biorcio 2014; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2014.

¹⁶ For more about the Alternative for Germany, see: Niedermayer 2014; Bebnowsky 2015.

¹⁷ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014.

¹⁸ For more about about Podemos, see: Gomez-Reino and Llamazares 2015.

transferred it to supranational institutions, the European Union still lacks democratic legitimation and a balance sheet of a suitable dimension. As a consequence, the most important decisions on controversial issues are made by the central banks and by the governments of economically stronger member states—a situation that Ulrich Beck's appellation, *German Europe*, describes very well, (2012). Moreover, the European Union, which Laurent Baumel terms "the Trojan Horse of neoliberalism" (2014), is so unable to protect the middle and lower classes that, under the pressure of their worsening standards of living, these classes are supporting the charismatic populist leaders who position themselves as spokespeople ready to voice the people's demands.

Moreover, in some countries, such as Greece and Italy, the economic crisis escalated internal and already severe political crises.¹⁹ As Takis S. Pappas and Hanspeter Kriesi confirm in their analyses (2015, p. 324), this tandem between economic and internal political crises intensified populism in these countries.

3. THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A COMMON ENEMY

Generated in this framework, the contemporary relationship between populism and crisis in Western Europe is built on the endemic weaknesses of the European integration project. In effect, the crisis has been exploited by a rash of finger pointing at the EU's primary institutions in Luxembourg and Brussels and at European Central Bank in Frankfurt, accusing them for spawning the Great Recession or of simply leading the popular dissatisfaction with these institutions.

This strategy of blaming the EU has been employed by all of the current populist parties, both old and new. As Matthew Goodwin points out, "ever since the arrival of the crisis in 2008, UKIP has moved to address public anxieties about the recession and its effects by framing the Eurozone crisis as validating its long tradition of hard Euroscepticism," (2015, p. 282); this move supported UKIP's principal goal of withdrawing the UK from the EU. According to Farage, the crisis makes the anti-democratic credentials of the EU more evident, as demonstrated by Greece and Italy's puppet technocratic governments of Papademos and Monti (*Ibid.*, p. 283). Similarly, in France, Marine Le Pen took advantage of the economic crisis to reinvent herself as "an uncompromising promoter of French sovereignty" poised to initiate "France's exit from the Eurozone and the reintroduction of the franc [as] the cornerstone of her economic program," (Betz 2015, p. 76 and p. 83). LePen proclaimed that "the euro was not only responsible for asphyxiating French economic growth and destroying whole industries; it was also the cause of the explosion of mass unemployment in France and elsewhere in the EU," (*Ibid.*, p. 83). At the same time, LePen, riding on English Euroscepticism, approves of the British *referendum* on EU membership, condemns the European Union as undemocratic, and wishes for France's departure from the EU. LePen overtly presents herself as Madame Frexit: "I will be Madame Frexit if the European Union doesn't give us back our monetary, legislative, territorial, and budget sovereignty. I believe that sovereignty is the twin sister of democracy. If there's no sovereignty, there's no democracy. I'm a democrat, I will fight until the end to defend democracy

¹⁹ For more about Greece, see: Pappas and Aslanidis 2015. For more about Italy, see: Bobba and McDonnell 2015, p. 170.

and the will of the people. If I don't manage to negotiate with the European Union, something I wish, then I will ask the French to leave the European Union. And then you'll be able to call me Madame Frexit," (Holehouse and Riley-Smith 2015). The Finns Party in Finland echoes this same rhetoric; they are also advocating for a "minimal EU" (Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila 2015, pp. 61-62). Although the Finns Party has not explicitly called for Finland's secession from the EU, the party opposes federal development of the European Union and fights against any mention of the country's EU membership in the Finnish Constitution as such a mention would lead to a constitutional protection of Finland's EU membership. Not surprisingly, the Finns Party—with a platform that criticizes technocratic European governance and the cost of EU membership—also demands a reduction in *European interference* and calls for measures to safeguard national sovereignty.²⁰ The situation is not very different in Germany and Italy. Both the Alternative for Germany²¹ and the Five Star Movement²² consider abolishing the euro an essential step towards overcoming the crisis and returning competence to member states. Both groups question the democratic legitimacy of the European Union. Both movements blame the European elite and

²⁰ On the English-language version of the party's website, under the heading "The Party's EU Politics," the position is synthesized as, "The Finns Party is a leading EU-skeptic party in Finland. The Party argues that the European Union is working far below its capability and much could be done for improvement. Its opinion is that the EU meddles too much into citizens' everyday affairs and is creating excessive central governance in Brussels. The Party does not accept the over-centralisation of power to unelected technocrats and commissioners who are too distant from the citizens in the EU countries. Possibilities have to be increased for the people's voice in local areas to reach the decision-makers. The Party also believes that the EU membership costs for Finland are too high and the calculation process needs re-evaluation and correction. The Party is committed to a continuous revision and renewal process for the EU – the dynamism of such a diverse community and a corresponding need for change must be recognized. The Party believes Finland should renegotiate its membership in the Union, transfer more power back to Finland from Brussels, reduce the power of the EU Commission, and diminish common responsibility in economic affairs. The latter is very important with regard to respecting the no-bailout clause of the Maastricht Treaty. The Party believes that distributing existing bank debt across Europe will result in an even wider crisis. It is NOT the function of the EU to rescue the financial disasters of the investment bankers! Other solutions must be found. With respect to the Euro single currency, the Party wishes to open and encourage discussion about various options. The current financial crisis has shown that the Euro is not only a financial project but also a political one. The Euro members differ too much with each other for the Euro to function properly without some kind of integrated financial framework. Any integration requires extremely creative solutions – taking into account both areas for common responsibility as well as the preservation of the members' own economic environments" (Perussuomalaiset 2016).

²¹ On the website of Alternative for Germany, under the heading "Program and Background, Questions and Answers, EU and Europe", it is written that: "The social upheaval in South Europe has never been worse; unemployment in the Eurozone, especially among the young, has never been higher, the state debt has never been more alarming, and the state governments have never been less inhibited to break treaties and to put into question the criteria of stability. The old parties have sacrificed the future of Europe to rescue the Euro and the banks. The Alternative for Germany calls for a departure from a policy of centralism toward a process as close as possible to the citizenry. The principle of subsidiarity must be re-established. The Alternative for Germany is committed to review the division of powers between the EU and the Member States in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity and, wherever possible, to enforce a return of powers to the individual countries. In addition, as an expression of the weight of Germany in the EU, the German language must be practiced as a language of equal value for negotiation and procedure. As a party committed to democracy, we reject that essentially democratic decisions are made in bodies that are not legitimised democratically. At the EU level, the shortcomings in this regard are obvious", (Alternative für Deutschland 2016).

²² For more on the position of the Five Star Movement see, Beppe Grillo's interview with Reuters, see: Casilli 2015.

the “old parties” that support it for playing significant roles in the decline of the economy and for contributing to what they believe are dysfunctional democracies. Demands for greater participation in European decisions and for censuring the European and international financial elite are also expressed by Syriza, Podemos, and Juntos Podemos. Their criticisms, however, do not extend to European currency; instead, they focus on Troika and the austerity policies imposed by the European Union and Germany. As Takis P. Pappas and Paris Aslanidis observe, the populist discourse of Syriza is “couched in battle terms . . . the party identifies itself at the forefront of a struggle against the German order in Europe,” (2015, p. 194). According to the programme presented at Greece’s Thessaloniki International Fair in September 2014,²³ Syriza would have led the country to recovery by gradually reversing all of the EU Memorandum injustice in three steps: 1) writing off the greater part of the public debt—as was done for Germany in 1953; 2) launching a so-called European New Deal; and 3) rebuilding the welfare state. The position of Podemos is very close to that of Syriza, since Podemos aims to renegotiate the country’s debt with its international creditors in the same way Syriza promised. Within Podemos’s party program, available on its website (Podemos, 2016), two key goals stand out: reforming statutes of the European Central Bank and other EU institutions in order to democratize political and economic decisions in the Eurozone and establishing a European conference in order to discuss coordinated public debt restructuring within the Eurozone.

Therefore, there are two distinguishable populist movements.

- ♦ **The anti-European movement** includes the so-called right-wing populist parties (FN, UKIP, AfD, LN) but also encompasses groups like the Finns Party and the Five Star Movement that evade the traditional classification of right-wing populism or leftist populism.²⁴ All of the anti-European movement actors seek a drastic reduction in the European Union’s influence or advocate that their state leave the Eurozone and return to a national currency. Some of them also wish to leave the European Union.
- ♦ **The movement for a different Europe** includes the so-called leftist populist parties and groups represented by Syriza, Podemos, and Juntos-Podemos. Unlike the Eurosceptic parties in the anti-European movement, populist actors in the movement for a different Europe do not blame the euro, but—as these groups were born in countries more afflicted by the economic crisis—they are fighting against austerity policies and ask that these measures be renegotiated in the name of solidarity among European people and in order to create a more balanced European Union.

Despite the differences between these two types of populist movements, and among the various populist movements spread across the whole of Europe, it is possible to identify

²³ Syriza 2014.

²⁴ As Bobba and McDonnel (2015, pp. 173-174) underscore, “The M5S is hard to classify ideologically due its short history, its eclectic mix of policies and its unique organisational characteristics . . . Nonetheless, there has already been broad agreement among scholars that M5S discourse – and particularly the statements of its founder, Beppe Grillo, both before and after the movement’s foundation – is classifiable as populist . . . The M5S is not, however, a case of right-wing populism: in its policies it combines a range of themes from different ideologies (left, right, environmental) and there is no clear identification—and denigration—of ‘the other’ in its discourse.”

some common features among them. The first common feature they share is a demand for greater national sovereignty. One expression of this claim for greater sovereignty is the call for national referendums concerning their member state's participation in the Eurozone and in the European Union (as required by anti-European populists) or concerning other important issues, as happened in Greece with the referendum held on July 5, 2015 on the bailout conditions in the austerity policies imposed by EU institutions.²⁵ Another significant common feature shared among Europe's populist movements is an aspiration to change the Eurozone and the European Union's structure: anti-European movement actors seek to dissolve the Eurozone and the EU, while the movement for a different Europe actors advocate renegotiations. Both movements reject the dominant European dogma of neoliberalism, perceiving it as a barrier to social justice or to introducing protectionist measures. Additionally, both movements identify a corrupt elite in the traditional parties and in the European bureaucracy and technocracy and they frequently refuse to cooperate with other political forces—as illustrated in the behaviour of the Five Star Movement in Italy.

So, from the perspective of Europe's contemporary populism, the European Union is a common enemy (Diamanti 2015). Indeed, in the view of these populist actors, "Europe is against the people's will," (Pinelli 2011, p. 14). These movements have acquired force as opposition parties, they hold the power to blackmail the majority and to influence the government. It is clear that UKIP pressured Cameron's government to hold a referendum on the continued membership of the United Kingdom within the European Union (the so-called Brexit). The negative consequences of this political choice are currently unfolding. The unexpected June 23, 2016 victory of the 51.89 per cent of Britons who voted to leave the EU (over the 48.11 per cent who voted to remain) demonstrates the dangers of direct democracy during such critical phases—a danger Italian constitutionalist Gustavo Zagrebelsky explains so very well in his discussion of the trial of Jesus and the people's decision to save Barabbas in his book *«crucifige!» e la democrazia* (1995). Some of these populist parties have even managed to steer the state: Greece's Syriza made the whole European establishment shiver with its *OKI* in the July 5, 2015 referendum and the Finns Party is participating for the first time in the governmental coalition. The serious problem with populist party influence on government is that the populist parties agitate the people, but instead of putting forth a clear and efficacious program, they present an idea to destroy something (in the case of the first group) or with promises that they are not able to keep (in the case of the second group). In fact, with regard to anti-European populism, leaving the Eurozone or the European Union will not restore an ailing economy and will not isolate the economy of one state from another; the market is global. With regard to the populist movement for a different Europe, Syriza is once again paradigmatic. Despite its clamour, the *OKI* vote victory in the Greek referendum did not result in any changes, and the leader of Syriza was aware of the impotency of that outcome before holding the referendum. The will of one state's people could never have prevailed on the will of the other EU member states. The Greek government, in order to remain in the Eurozone,

²⁵ For a critical analysis of this referendum, see: Sygkelos 2015.

was forced to accept a bailout package that contained deeper pension cuts and greater tax increases than the package rejected by Greek voters in the referendum—a demonstration of the voice of the people going unheeded. Nevertheless, the failure of the program is proven by the resignations of Giannis Varoufakis on July, 6 2015 and of Alexis Tsipras on August 20, 2015. Though their resignations were tactical moves to maintain party power, this failure is further evidenced in the inauguration of a more moderate position that could be defined as deferential to European guidelines. The voter turnout in the subsequent September 20, 2015 election—a mere 56.57 per cent—was the lowest in Greek history and shows that the principal effect of the Syriza experiment in government was an increase in political disaffection.

5. CONCLUSION

While the development of the European Union is experiencing deadlock for many reasons, contemporary populism encourages further depoliticizing the integration process and depriving the dream of the European Fathers of any meaning—a path that leads to widespread populism.²⁶ Yet, to solve Europe's issues—a failing economy, social inequality, immigration, etc.—*more* Europe is needed in the form of a common political project, not less Europe, reduced to an empty container of rules.

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²⁶ André Gerrits argues, "The strategy of de-politicization confirms the populists' critique of the European Union as a conspiracy in power, controlled by technocrats, devoid of transparency and legitimacy, and endangering the interests of the nation and state," (2014, p. 7).

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